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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Popular Block Protests Presence of Honduran Troops in Iraq and Against U.S. Foreign Policy

Ref: Tegucigalpa 542

1. The Popular Block (Bloque Popular-BP) pulled together a small and peaceful two-hour demonstration on March 20 at the Embassy to protest the "War on Iraq." The BP convoked its member labor unions, indigenous groups, affiliated leftist political party, the Democratic Union, student organizations, and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Despite the participation of at least nine different "popular" groups, the estimated turnout was below the organizers' desired goal (although twice as large as previous protests.) Embassy security officials estimated the crowd at about 300 people while local media reported its size at about 1,000.

2. The BP leader, Carlos H. Reyes, led the group's protest against Honduran President Ricardo Maduro's deployment of Honduran troops in Iraq and a wide range of other U.S. foreign policies, including the recently concluded Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the presence of U.S. troops in Honduras (a hardy perennial for the BP.) He called for the return of Honduran troops from Iraq and the departure of President Maduro from office, calling on Spain to take away Maduro and his "gang". He also warned that the (terrorist) attacks in Madrid demonstrated the risks Honduras was incurring for making common cause with what he termed President Bush's invasion of Iraq.

3. Reyes charged that in the era of globalization the U.S. was pursuing two ways of taking over the natural resources and wealth of poor countries - free trade agreements and war. He said that "in the case of Iraq the (U.S.) applied a war policy but in Honduras and Central America it was using free trade agreements." He then told the crowd that the BP called on the U.S. to end its military intervention in Iraq and its intervention in other countries around the world. Other leaders reportedly called Presidents Bush and Maduro "fascists" and said they were the "terrorists." The BP also announced a petition campaign to gather signatures in opposition to ratification of the CAFTA by the National Congress.

4. Comment: This protest by the BP was only sparsely attended, included at least two buses of protesters for hire, and evinced very little substantive support by the broader Honduran political spectrum, despite public opinion polls that show that approximately 70 percent of Hondurans are opposed to the deployment of Honduran troops in Iraq. The BP remains unable to motivate mass public protest against either the Maduro government's policies or U.S. foreign policy, and poses at this moment a minimal political threat. End Comment.

Palmer